

Aquinas

Forum

A SECOND
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Aquinas Forum Columnist

In an old story a student complains to his teacher that other teachers gave gifts to their students as rewards for doing well in their studies. He told the teacher of a beautiful book a friend was given after performing well on a lesson. The teacher asked the student if he was able to read the book that his friend was given. When the student answered that he could read it even better than his friend the teacher said that must be reward enough.

The word "teach" shares a common ancestry with the word "token." Their closest forbear is the Old English word "taecen" which means sign or mark. It seems only natural that the teacher who has been the greatest influence on my life was named Mark. Mark E. Clarke taught English at Scranton Preparatory School until his death at the age of 31 in 1989. 1989 was also my senior year of high school.

Today, I look toward the end of yet another senior year and remember four years ago. In remembering I am forced to look toward the end of Mark's life. But it is not there that I dwell.

I do not remember Mark's funeral, I do not remember his hospital stay, and I do not even remember the final weeks he spent in school before he died. These are not the tokens Mark would want me to carry as signs of his life. Instead, I remember freshman year and Mr. Clarke as my homeroom and English teacher.

During that year we read Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." I have carried from the experience of reading this novel words Mr. Clarke spoke concerning the role of the novelist. In his introduction to the novel Mr. Clarke told us that Joseph Conrad considered the novelist "a movement and a voice." He told us to watch for the movement and listen for the voice.

I watched and listened. The movement I have always seen is a wing sweeping across the page of a book or a ripple across the surface of the page. The voice I heard, as a freshman in high school, was that of a 28-year-old English teacher who would burst into laughter when I would discover one of his secrets.

Mark inspired these images. His tweed coat and bewildered hair allowed me to imagine him spending long afternoons poring over leather-bound books in his apartment. And as I watch I see Mark's books flutter and ripple and hear the voice he must have heard. It is the voice of a high school freshman trying to understand what the words on the page may mean and becoming delighted when they are illuminated.

Marked by these images I cannot see the end of my friend's life; I can only see the possibility of beginnings and what our first encounter promised. Mark became the token that I would take from our relationship. And in return I present these signs on a page for his inspection. In his eyes I hope they ripple and in his ears I hope the voice of a 22-year-old college senior reminds him that he still lives.

Diversity differs in
the way you mix it

Thanks to Yohuru Williams, we now have another metaphor to compete with the images of the "melting pot" and the "mosaic" to describe the American experience: the analogy of a cup of tea, including the University as the all-important spoon. I remembered the Irish saying "Life is like a cup of tea — it's how you make it," and after reading Williams article, I realized that history, too, is like a cup of tea, and Donald Beshada and Yohuru Williams make that tea in two very different ways.

Beshada's recipe represents the one that has dominated textbooks and is not only dangerously inadequate but also disturbing in its scope. He urges greater concentration in U.S. history based on the fact that "one-third of 17-year-olds do not know who wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, or that some students do not know important dates in American history."

This attitude reflects the inordinate emphasis placed on political history in secondary and college textbooks to the exclusion of social and cultural history, an emphasis which has led to the conception of history as nothing more than facts and dates to be memorized. I believe Beshada would be as disappointed in this erroneous conception as I am.

Instead of reciting the date and text of the Emancipation Proclamation, I would rather that students understood the reasons behind the

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Proclamation, an understanding which would include an appreciation of life in the ante-bellum and Civil War years.

Students would also respond to the stories of the men and women who gave their blood and sweat in the fight for American independence, stories which are more inspiring, infinitely more interesting, and ultimately more important than the precise dates of the American revolution.

Beshada complains that "multiculturalists neglect to tell their audience the complete story." Williams, also, preoccupies himself in the search for the "whole story," which he believes exists outside the "system."

Williams claims to desire only to present the truth, by which he means to "evaluate the subject from all sides." He writes that if history "was presented honestly, there would be no need for multicultural courses."

This statement worries me, because I believe that history is, by its nature, subjective. The goal of the historian, therefore, is not to become objective but to be as unsubjective as possible. The multiculturalists risk presenting their own

particular view of the story as the "whole story."

I am concerned that this encourages cultural separatism, a phenomenon which the PC movement set out to rectify. I do not think Williams serves his purpose by listing the historical figures of African descent.

Women's history interests me, not because I am a woman but because I see women's history as one of the untapped sources of human history as a whole. Along the same lines, I find the study of non-Western culture both intellectually stimulating and personally liberating.

I agree with Robert Hughes, an essayist who defined the historian's task as "the preservation of complexity;" otherwise, history will become nothing more than propaganda which will have lost its vitality either through one-sidedness or through extensive moralizing.

I believe the University has taken a step in the right direction through the cultural diversity requirement, although I am afraid the University/spoon model may be too simplistic. Eventually intelligent people will realize that the key to succeeding in the globalized world of the next century involves the ability to think and act in ways that will help cross religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and gender barriers.

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